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ABSTRACT

The minority image presented in the majority of children's books is too often a stereotype of a particular minority. Blacks are seen as ludicrous or unnaturally good, as ghetto bound, and--when portrayed in a group of characters--as the only dialect speakers in the group; American Indians are portrayed with depersonalization and ridicule; and Spanish American characters (including Mexicans and Puerto Ricans) suffer from the perpetuation of negative myths and the failure to define them as persons. Not only is it necessary to eliminate stereotypes in children's books, but it is also essential to bring minority group members into all phases of writing and publishing. In addition, teachers should select nonstereotyped reading materials, teach critical reading skills, and emphasize an understanding of other people through book discussions and role play. (JM)

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THE MINORITY IMAGE IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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This writer recently posed the same question to two different groups of students who are training to become elementary teachers. They were asked to write their responses on 4 X 6 index cards. Group one was composed of sophomores, juniors and seniors in a small, exurban liberal arts college. Group two, in a large urban university, consisted of juniors and seniors.

The question was this: If you were to listen to a speech entitled "The Minority Image in Children's Books," what would you want to learn? When the question was asked to group one, they responded with puzzled looks and hesitancy for a minute or so and then a hand went up. "I don't know what a minority image means," said one student and about half of the class admitted that they didn't know either. After additional discussion they wrote their responses.

An analysis of the responses revealed that an overwhelming majority wanted to know what minority image <u>was</u> reflected in children's books. Was it unsatisfactory? If so, why couldn't publishers do something about it? How could teachers correct a negative image? What books reflect an honest image?

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Group two was well informed as to the meaning of minority image, but their responses also revealed that they wanted to know how to deal with books which reflected negative images.

Their responses not only provided motivation but really set the purpose for this article. While some of the questions were quite surprising, those dealing with methodology were expected. Yet I feel a little concerned when I think that some of the lesser informed ones will be reading children's books in their own classrooms next year.

Another cause for concern is the fact that some students were not even aware that there was such a thing as a "wrong image" in some children's books. One would suppose that this lack of awareness exists because the respondents have either lived in an environment insulated against social change, or they have never been hurt by a stereotyped illustration or demeaning passage aimed at their particular ethnic group. It is very possible that these "wrong images" have never been questioned because everyone is not affected by them. More often than not, the lack of awareness is a result of the way minorities have been presented in children's books.

Black Americans

Sometimes a book is written with only the white reader in mind, where the major characters are white, and blacks if at all

included appear in the background, are ludicrous or unnaturally good, ghettobound, and the only dialect speakers in the group.

"A Train Full of Strangers," a selection from Told Under the City Umbrella (Association for Childhood Education International, 1972) is a fitting example. It contains all the demeaning thoughts and expressions commonly used in connection with minorities. Ten-year-old Susan and her brother Hal were riding a subway train to a TV show downtown, and "at 125th two Negro boys got on." Only the Negro boys were poorly dressed, spoke in a dialect, and had no appreciation for Science.

Where Did You Come From? (Koch, 1968) exemplifies the same weaknesses. The story, intended for grades 3-5, tells about a new boy in the neighborhood. The theme seems innocent enough and "yet on almost every page of the book, Black people are described in ways that are stereotyped, reflective of the ignorance and paternalism that white people in America have traditionally shown toward Black people." (Baxter, p. 540)

There is a growing trend toward presenting the "black experience"--more black characters--in children's books, and this may be a bittersweet victory. The wealth of research in urban studies has brought about increased sensitivity regarding black-white differences in intellectual stimulation. As a result of this increased awareness, most of the new literature also stresses racial differences. While intentions are good, new stereotypes

are becoming evident.

"What the social scientists have inadvertently done is to create a new stereotype of the Negro child who lives in a ghetto, who comes from a broken home, and who has had sordid experiences with adults. In many ways, we have substituted a new stereotype of the Negro which is hardly more complimentary than the old one." (Elkind, p. 6)

Have you observed the number and kinds of books presenting the "black experience" since the appearance of Evan's Corner? We cannot be sure that presenting children (both black and white) with black characters in roles of dignity and pride will undo the damage already done, but it certainly will help. The following books offer some possibilities.
Shirley Chisholm: A Biography (Doubleday, 1970); Ralph Bunche: A Most Reluctant Hero (Hawthorn, 1974); Matthew Henson: Artic Hero (Houghton, 1966); Thurgood Marshall: Fighter for Justice (McGraw-Hill, 1969; What Color Are You? (Johnson, 1973); Black is Brown is Tan (Harper, 1973); and Daniel Hale Williams: Open Heart Doctor (McGraw-Hill, 1971).

Honest and meaningful experiences with the foregoing books can help to reduce the stereotyping of black characters.

The Image of American Indians

American Indians have not always been presented fairly in children's books either. For years the publishers have produced thousands of books about them, "but American Indians today, as in the past, are merely images projected by non-Indian writers." A common belief is that there is too much material about Indians and not enough by them.

A frequent complaint about children's books with Indian themes is the stereotyped manner in which the group is portrayed. Often there is depersonalization and ridicule. Mary G. Byler, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and editor of Indian Affairs, sums it up this way:

> There are too many books featuring painted, whooping, be-feathered Indians closing in on too many forts, maliciously attacking "peaceful" settlers or simply leering menacingly from the background; too many books in which white benevolence is the only thing that saves the day for the incompetent, childlike Indian; too many stories setting forth what is "best" for the American Indians. (p. 36)

In her well-documented article, the author looks at several children's books which she believes present stereotyped images of Indians. She found Buffalo Man and Golden Eagle (Dutton, 1970) to be quite offensive because the book truly fits the de-

scription of being about Indians. She comments:

This book was originally published in Austria. The author was born in Germany, studied in Munich, now lives in Bavaria and raises riding ponies . . . .

It is one thing to write about imaginary beings from an imaginary time and place, but American Indians are real people and deserve the dignity of being treated as such. (p. 37)

One book which obviously had good intentions fell short of the mark. The Secret Name (Harcourt, 1972) is the story of a shy, eight-year-old Navaho girl who comes from the reservation to live with a white family and go to school in Salt Lake City. This story, too, follows the pattern of the benevolent white benefactor and is not acceptable. Besides, it reflects a distorted attitude which further adds to its distastefulness. "Dad thinks Indians are like wild animals--like wild foxes. You can tame them a little bit, but not all the way." (p. 113)

Many books have been written which present "wrong images" about Indians. There are some, however, that members of their own group have approved. Among the more recent ones are the following: William Whipple Warren (Dillon Press, 1972), which tells the story of his work in the Territorial House of Representatives; Geronimo: His Own Story (Dutton, 1970) gives both a cultural and historical account of the Apaches. The Sioux

Today (Macmillan, 1972) describes the daily lives of the modern Sioux, focuses on Chuck, who decides to let his hair grow and is called a "militant" and Betty, a "new Indian" who refuses to be called a "squaw."

Spanish Americans

Spanish American writers feel that much of the problem of overgeneralization and stereotyping about them lies in the fact that the groups are ill-defined and unnoticed. Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans tell a similar story. Gilbert Martinez observes:

> The image of the Mexican peon, asleep against the wall of his adobe hut at the foot of the saguaro cactus, perpetuates a false stereotype. At best he wears only sandals on his feet. He is lazy and given to putting things off until manana. This picturesque fellow and his burro adorn the menus and neon signs of restaurants and motels all across the country. At some point in his life the peon wakes up, takes a swig of tequila, puts on his sombrero, and emigrates to the United States by swimming across the Rio Grande. Of course, once in the United States he loses his picturesque and harmless ways and becomes sinister and cruel. (p. 21)

A Puerto Rican writer speaks:

> The migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States has

evoked only hostility when it has evoked any reaction; otherwise, Puerto Ricans are invisible to the mass media and in the book and audiovisual materials.

. . . I leave with you the message that Puerto Rican children, as well as other Spanish speaking children, need books that help them understand and love their cultural heritage and books that help them under tand their experiences in their new home in order to develop as healthy human beings. Other children need to learn in the same manner about these schoolmates and neighbors so that they can respect them as equals. (pp. 26-27)

Martinez states that negative myths are kept alive and perpetuated in materials such as "The Law West of the Pecos" in A Treasury of American Folklore, edited by B. A. Botkin. The publication date does not always guarantee acceptability. Some of the most modern books, such as Child of Fire (Houghton, 1974) have been criticized as being too sentimental and unrealistic. Some other books, however, have been more widely accepted by those most affected. Among them are Sabrina (Dial, 1971); Santiago (Warne, 1969); ABC de Puerto Rica (Troutman, 1971); and Caesar Chavez (Crowell, 1970).

It is common knowledge that there are many children's books on the market that are not acceptable to minorities. It is also known that there are books which portray them with dignity and

respect--and this is encouraging. But there aren't enough! Elkind believes that much of the stereotyping in black children's books could be overcome by diversifying the settings, but suggests that this is not the whole job. "In addition to changing the content of children's literature to eliminate stereotypes and make it relevant to black children, we also need to bring blacks into all phases of the writing and publishing fields." (p. 8) This same principle is most appropriate for other minority groups.

Book discussions and role play are very good ways to help children understand and relate to those different from themselves. Literature books can often be integrated with the regular reading materials, especially in regard to critical reading skills.

Because of the proliferation of doublespeak, it is imperative to teach critical reading skills. Analyzing an author's purpose, determining if dialect is correct--or needed--, judging the accuracy of illustrations and comparing the roles of the different story characters are all good activities to use when dealing with children's books.

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